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Hold me while I'm naked: *George Kuchar, stretch marks and all.*

SF Bay Guardian Nov 10, 1993

Smorgasbord of sin

George Kuchar remembers Curt McDowell, the making of Thundercrack! *and the paws of a sex-crazed gorilla.* **By Chuck Stephens**

WHEN GEORGE KUCHAR opens his mouth, poetry — and a little piece of apple pie — flies out: "I always liked those Bela Lugosi movies where he's acting with some guy in a gorilla suit. I always thought that was nice. That, and when he had a dwarf with him. I think the dwarf had an Italian name."

Listening to George Kuchar speak is one of life's little pleasures: the doofus cadences of his voice, his slappy and beguiling vocabulary. He is — alongside Russ Meyer — one of American filmmaking's great orators, and his films (like Meyer's) long ago frothed the camp aesthetic into a gooey ambrosia. The 60-odd movies and 100-some videotapes he's made since his 1950s boyhood in the Bronx are filled to their spattered brims with epic visions of the lusty and the lumpen.

Kuchar's taste for lard-heavy horror and florid melodrama is shadowy and ornate, suggesting a von Sternberg with stretch marks, or the anguished mannerisms of a berserk Sirk. But his recurrent topics for contemplation — the weather and his digestive problems (big stinky stools and the occasional chirrup of gas) — have come to seem like eternal verities. The meditative beauty with which he can imbue a thunderstruck Oklahoma plain, or a rich broth of regurgitated Dinty Moore beef stew, confirm that he will one day be recognized as a great American naturalist — if not the William Carlos Williams of broken wind.

Today, George is sampling the apple pie at the over-named Pazazz restaurant (the pie's a little cold) and reminiscing about his friend and occasional lover, the late filmmaker Curt McDowell. During the 1970s, McDowell gained an international reputation as a filmmaker/*provocateur* with a series of whimsical, sexually aggressive underground films that seemed guided by an inner mandate to whip it out and get it on.

Over the next several days, the Castro will present a wide-ranging selection of the films Kuchar and McDowell collaborated on: mixed-up musicals (*Boggy Depot*), switch-hitting psychodramas (*Confessions*), and moody haiku on the restorative powers of the San Francisco fog (*A Reason to Live*).

Over pie, I ask George what he remembers about San Francisco in 1971, the year he first met McDowell:

"San Francisco was considered an outdoor bordello at that particular time," he muses, "and it was nice — though it had its hellish moments, too! It was 'different,' I suppose [*dirty laughter*]."

"So you came out for the bordello?" I ask, prompting more crumb-speckled chortles.

"No, I came for the job! But anything else was just extra trappings, you know what I mean?"

The job, at that time, was a one-year contract to teach filmmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute — "That art school up by Fisherman's Wharf," George calls it, as if giving directions. He still teaches there today.

"Curt was my first student when I first walked into the room — which was about a quarter to nine. He was sitting there on the desk in cutoff jeans and sandals. He seemed like a nice, playful person, with a beard and blondish hair. And he was the first student I met at that time — that morning, anyway. And so, we began to share each other — first literally, and then on the screen.

"He would use me in his pictures, in musicals and stuff like that — which gave me an opportunity to sing, even though I can't hold a note. But he always had liquor and he plied me with it. Then I started putting him in my pictures. And at that time he was very interested in doing a pornography — it was his life's calling — so he asked if I would write the dialogue for it."

That "pornography" became Curt McDowell's best-known (if not best) film, *Thundercrack!*: a garish and very long claustro-*noir* in which seven unlikely actors — Kuchar among them — spend a storm-soaked night in a old dark mansion known as Prairie Blossom. Presided over by Mrs. Gert Hammond (Marion Eaton, in a demented performance that the Residents might have elicited from Joan Crawford), Prairie Blossom comes complete with pickled corpses, monstrous children hidden in locked rooms, and *(Continued on page 40)*

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KUCHAR *From page 39*

a peephole vantage point from which to observe the polymorphous passions of a cast of mustachioed stud-clones and hard-boiled muffins, a bewildered Jesus freak, and a sex-crazed gorilla.

In hindsight, Curt McDowell appears to have been a sort of cartoon satyr, a chubby bacchanalian imp whose reputation as a libertine has become an integral part of his "bad boy" legend. *Thundercrack!* — like many of McDowell's better, shorter films — frequently erupts into a quagmire of triple-X action. Every sort of coupling is encouraged (cornholing, peter-eating vacuum-pumps, squash dildos, and rubber damsels), but anything resembling genuine passion between the performers is rare. Frenzy and disgust, consensuality and cringing, often coexist in the same blow job. His strongest shorts (*Confessions, Nudes: A Sketchbook*) wed the ardently bisexual, if thoroughly masculine, hand-job fantasies of his Indiana youth to the playful, formal spontaneity of Jack (*Flaming Creatures*) Smith and Ken (*Little Stabs at Happiness*) Jacobs. Kuchar, however, remained his greatest influence.

"He was a pumpkin-pie type of person," George recalls. "You know, cooking food, being social, a real Indiana transplant, sewing costumes and telling us stories about his mother ... very generous and fun-loving. But he was also this kind of lewd, crazy person who went out on binges. He kept huge diaries — in those Woolworth ledgers you buy for two dollars — filled with all sorts of adventures that would fill his days. And the days were filled!

"Curt enjoyed working out his energy. It made him meet a lot of people — and he'd meet 'em all kinds of places: in the park, in the porno theater, on the street, in a car. He liked expressing himself. I always thought he was into sex magic and didn't realize it. Sometimes I thought he had low self-esteem, and I used to think about him like he was a cannibal — like if you eat other people, you'll acquire their attributes. He was like a catalyst; he brought people together and got them involved in situations they normally wouldn't have gotten involved in."

"Sexual situations?"

"Yeah, sexual, and also, well ... like, I never cared much for bowling, but when you went out bowling with Curt it was fun.

"There's a guy down in L.A. hoping to transform Curt's diaries into a screenplay — but I think he just wants to get a kick out of reading all that filthy material! I hope he does eventually make the picture, because I told him I want Harry Hamlin to play me! Of course he paid no attention."

Kuchar wrote the 192 pages of *Thundercrack!* (during an extended stay at an Oklahoma YMCA) in ballpoint pen to prohibit erasures and the temptations of endless rewrites. With its 2½-hour running time, it appears McDowell decided to shoot every line — and it feels more like an endurance test than an entertainment. "But if you're gonna suffer through that picture," George suggests, "you might as well suffer through the entire thing, because it tries to make sense. If you only watch an hour and a half, you'll suffer anyway, so see the whole thing. There's a cumulative effect."

"Actually," he says, recalling the production, "the most sexual situations would occur when we'd be shooting and there would be a ringing at the doorbell. It wouldn't be a vacuum cleaner salesman, but one of those types of people, somebody off the street, and then the sexual tension would get kind of high. They didn't realize what kind of situation they'd wound up in. It was always interesting when strangers came in — but of course they got out unscathed."

"Unscathed but sticky?"

"Hahaaha, that's it! To me, the sexual situations in *Thundercrack!* were like a lunch platter or something. I didn't think of it in sex terms: more like a smorgasbord, a buffet — with a lot of meat around — and since I was doing the lighting, I'd have to light it appetizingly."

In *Thundercrack!* Kuchar plays Bing, a lonely animal trainer who, while dressed in a wedding gown, finally consummates his desire for a lusty gorilla named Medusa. "Unfortunately, I never had time to memorize my lines — which was a great source of embarrassment since I wrote the damned thing! — but it seemed to give the character a little edge. I wrote that part for someone a bit more aesthetic looking — in an Austin, Texas, kind of way. I'm sort of bulky, but they asked me to do it anyway."

"You look good in that gown, though," I offer.

"It was horrible, and I hate that gown, and I hate that picture of me in that gown. When people ask for a publicity picture of me they always pull that one out! And I don't go around in a gown! Also, 'cause it was the '70s, I had a lot of hair sort of sticking out around the ears."

Hair around the ears wasn't the only thing sticking out during Bing's rapturous encounter with the ape — but the scene is shot in such a way that I couldn't resist asking George if he'd used a body double during his, um, paw job.

"No, that's me! And that's why when I went to see *Blue Lagoon* star ring Brooke Shields, I felt bad 'cause I heard she had used a body double! What about all her poor fans — they want to see the real Brooke Shields. Her mom should've loosened the reins a little bit. Plus, I wrote that dirty *Thundercrack!* So what am I gonna do — hold back and seem like a cheat and a phony!?!"

Even in the luscious grip of rubber monkey's-paw, George Kuchar, our national treasure, stands tall, firm, and true: loosening his reins and losing himself in a world of movie stars named Brooke and Bela, remembering a time of men in monkey suits and a dwarf with an Italian name. ■

'A Tribute to George Kuchar and Curt McDowell' *plays Fri/12–Wed/17 at the Castro Theatre, 429 Castro (at Market), S.F., (415) 621-6120.*

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